



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

PUBLICATIONS
OF THE
MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA,
1898.

VOL. XIII, 2.

NEW SERIES, VOL. VI, 2.

III.—A VIEW OF THE VIEWS ABOUT *HAMLET*.¹

“Verily, given a printing-press upon German soil,” says Dr. Furness, “and lo! an essay on *Hamlet*.” England and the United States, as might be expected, vie with Germany in contributing to the literature of this play. All the sister-nations of Europe, too, have their own essays on *Hamlet*. Numberless are those who confidently take up the task enjoined on Horatio by the dying Prince:—

“Report me and my cause aright.”

It behooves one therefore who would put forth another paper upon *Hamlet* to show cause at the outset why he should not be looked upon as a public enemy.

¹ I wish to acknowledge my constant indebtedness in preparing this paper to the great Variorum edition of *Hamlet* by Dr. H. H. Furness. Each criticism quoted or alluded to in the following pages can be found in that work unless some other specific reference is given.

The important work by Professor Loening of Jena, *Die Hamlet-Tragödie Shakespeares*, was not known to me until after this essay had reached what I supposed to be its completed form. Since reading that most penetrating, thorough, and judicious discussion of the play, I have used the new light thus obtained in revising my own more condensed treatment, but I have not changed in any way my fundamental plan. I first learned the significance of Loening's book from Professor W. H. Hulme's careful review in the *Modern Language Notes* for December, 1896.

My apology must be that it is not so much my purpose to write a new essay upon this play, as it is to classify and interpret the essays which have already been written. I desire to lighten the burden for those who study the literature concerning *Hamlet*, and at the same time to help those who are simply readers of the play. I shall confine attention for the most part to the central mystery of the drama, namely, Why does Hamlet delay to revenge the murder of his father, and so fulfil the command of the Ghost? Was his delay real, or only apparent? Was it blame-worthy, or blameless?

Three separate questions will come before us as we discuss the central problem of this drama. First, how many possible lines of explanation can be found for what seems to be the weak and procrastinating conduct of Hamlet? Practically the same as the preceding, so far as we can see, is a second inquiry, What theories of the play have as a matter of fact been put forward by critics? As we proceed, and especially at the close of the paper, a third question will naturally present itself, namely, How far are the various explanations that have been offered, or partial explanations, compatible with one another, or even complementary? and how far are they antagonistic, or even completely irreconcilable? The failure of critics to keep this last question clearly before them has perhaps caused as much confusion as any fact connected with the study of the drama. A commentator has often sought to overthrow the opinion of a predecessor by presenting considerations entirely compatible with those which had been emphasized by his fellow-interpreter.

I. THE COMMAND TO REVENGE.

A threefold command is laid upon Hamlet by the ghost of his father :—

“If thou didst ever thy dear father love—

(1) Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

- (2) But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, (3) nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught." I, v, 23-86.

Let us direct our attention, for a time, exclusively to the first injunction of the Ghost, the solemn adjuration to revenge, leaving the remaining commands to be considered later. The weight of emphasis seems plainly to rest upon this first mandate. The two qualifying commands come at the end of the closing speech of the Ghost; and the first one of them, "Taint not thy mind," is not present at all in the earliest version of the play, the First Quarto.

A difficulty meets us at the beginning of our inquiry which has probably caused more or less trouble to every student of *Hamlet*. What is the moral standing-ground of the play? What are its ethical presuppositions? What standards of right does it take for granted? *Should* Hamlet have accepted revenge,—an immediate, violent, bloody revenge,—as his one, all-inclusive duty? Those students of the play who make especially prominent the first command of the Ghost, say "Yes." *Should* he have accepted the testimony of the Ghost as final and conclusive? In any case, should the conduct of the King when witnessing the play have put an end to all doubt and hesitation, and led to immediate revenge? Those who accent the command to revenge will say "Yes" to one or both of these questions. According to this view, Hamlet is to be conceived as living at a time when the right and duty of blood-revenge are unquestioned. We are to accept on this point the passionate standards of the natural man. Hamlet is driven forward by the command of his father and by his own burning desire for vengeance. His task is, as Taine puts it, "to go quietly, and, with premeditation, plunge a sword into a breast."

If we adopt this view of the situation and of Hamlet's character, what are the possible explanations of his delay in securing vengeance? The following have been more or less clearly put forward by various critics:—

1. An excessive tendency to reflection.
2. Weakness of will.
3. An unhealthy or a disturbed emotional nature. This explanation takes two forms :—
 - a. A deep-seated melancholy is a fundamental characteristic of Hamlet's nature.
 - b. The discovery by Hamlet of the lies, hypocrisies, infidelities of life has brought with it a sickness of heart which paralyses the powers of action. That is, an extreme moral sensitive-ness is the important emotional quality.It is clear that these two statements, *a* and *b*, do not antagonize each other ; it is entirely possible to accept them both.
4. Suspicion of the Ghost, and doubt of the truth of his revelation.
5. An overpowering love for Ophelia.
6. A clear or a lurking consciousness of mental derangement.
7. Interest in playing the rôle of madman.
8. A wish to be a reformer, to set right his time.
9. Certain bodily infirmities.
10. Cowardice.

The first three of the above explanations are closely affiliated ; they naturally complement one another. They agree in representing Hamlet's difficulty as personal, subjective : the first suggestion would make the defect in his nature an intellectual one ; the second would make it volitional ; the third, emotional, temperamental. The attentive reader will note that these three separate suggested causes may fairly be looked upon to some degree as different ways of saying the same thing. By an excessive tendency to reflection we mean excessive in proportion to the activity of the other powers, especially the powers of action ; by weakness of will we may mean simply weakness in proportion to the activity of the other powers of the mind under the given circumstances. To

say that a man reflects too much, is practically to say that he decides, acts too little. And accompanying all reflection and volition, but deeper than they, are the great tides of the emotional being and the Gulf-stream of temperament.

It is very natural, therefore, if any one of these first three suggestions is accepted to give some weight to all of them. Students of the play, however, have often championed a single one of these considerations, without recognizing the others.

It is along the lines just indicated that the first great critics of Shakespeare interpreted the character of the Danish Prince. Coleridge pointed out Hamlet's "great, almost enormous, intellectual activity," what Vischer calls the "excess in Hamlet of a reflective, meditative habit of mind." Among the many scholars who have followed the great English interpreter in making prominent the tendency of Hamlet to lose himself in reflection, I will mention Hazlitt, Dowden, and Hermann Grimm. Taine and others, who speak of Hamlet's "too lively imagination," also belong here.

Goethe apparently intended to attribute to Hamlet both weakness of volition and extreme moral sensitiveness, in his famous criticism of the play; but infirmity of will seems to have been most prominent in his thought. To him the tragedy tells the story of "a great deed laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it." Richard Grant White characterizes Hamlet as "constitutionally irresolute, purposeless, and procrastinating." Lowell and Schlegel also emphasize his lack of will-power.¹

Loening looks upon Hamlet's melancholy temperament as the fundamental fact in his nature. His tendency to lose himself in gloomy reflection and especially in bitter self-condemnation, his unwillingness to make decisions, and his

¹ I have not yet been able to read with care Kuno Fischer's *Shakespeare's Hamlet*, Heidelberg, 1896. F. A. Leo, in the *Shakespeare Jahrbuch* for 1897, expresses the opinion that the book is on the whole a presentation of the view of Goethe.

inability to set before himself and carry out any consistent, premeditated line of effective action,—these characteristics Loening considers to be but natural manifestations and accompaniments of this melancholy temperament. This interpreter wisely makes Hamlet's emotional nature the primary fact.

“Thought is deeper than all speech,
Feeling deeper than all thought.”

Loening points out that “great intellectual activity” does not necessarily tend to keep one from acting, and calls to mind Caesar's judgment upon Cassius, “He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.” A settled, constitutional aversion toward decision and action seems to be the deeper cause underneath Hamlet's “excessive tendency to reflection.”

A German critic, Sievers, holds that Hamlet is kept from acting by what I have called above extreme moral sensitiveness. Sievers says:—

“Hamlet is indeed a costly vase full of lovely flowers, for he is a pure human being, penetrated by enthusiasm for the Great and the Beautiful, living wholly in the Ideal, and, above all things, full of faith in man; and the vase is shattered into atoms from within,—this and just this Goethe truly felt,—but what causes the ruin of the vase is not that the great deed of avenging a father's murder exceeds its strength, but it is the discovery of the falseness of man, the discovery of the contradiction between the ideal world and the actual, which suddenly confronts him . . . in short, Hamlet perishes because the gloomy background of life is suddenly unrolled before him, because the sight of this robs him of his *faith* in life and in good, and because he now *cannot* act.”

It is an unimportant fact that the present writer agrees with the innumerable company who have accepted some form of that general theory of the play with which we have so far been dealing. Some mediation is necessary, to be sure, between the various views that have been outlined. Moreover, this line of interpretation needs, I think, to be supple-

mented at a number of points; but it should not be given up. And we should be especially careful not to look upon Hamlet's character as defective solely upon the intellectual, the volitional, or the emotional side. This drama, like real life, knows nothing of the sharp lines of division between intellect, feeling, and will, once dear to psychology.

It is well to remind ourselves before we go farther that Hamlet does act with great decision and energy at several points in the play. Those who accept the view of Werder, to be explained later, contend that Hamlet's true character manifests itself unchecked by circumstances in these vigorous measures. Loening's explanation of these outbreaks, and also of the frequent violence of Hamlet's language, is that the Prince has in his nature a passionate strain, "a choleric element." Under sudden provocation, and with an opportunity for action immediately before him, Hamlet can be bold and decisive. He warns Laertes, in the struggle over the body of Ophelia, that there is in him "something dangerous, which let thy wiseness fear."

The fourth possible ground for delay indicated above, Hamlet's fear that the Ghost may have deceived him, is usually accepted as having much weight. Just before the close of Act II the hero says:—

"The spirit that I have seen
May be the devil: and the devil hath power
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me."

II, II, 627-632.

Loening points out, however, that all the remaining portions of the soliloquy in which these words occur take for granted the entire truth of the Ghost's revelation and the guilt of the King. This fact seems to show that Hamlet's suspicion of the Ghost is only a pretence, in which he tries to find both a justification for the two months of inaction that have elapsed

since the revelation of the Ghost was made to him, and an additional reason in favor of the proposed play.

At the beginning of Act II, Ophelia tells Polonius of the meeting "so piteous and profound" which has just taken place between the Prince and herself. This passage, with others, has suggested the opinion that the devotion of the hero to her affects him so deeply, so absorbs his soul, that it furnishes an additional explanation of his dilatoriness. A certain Dr. Woelffel probably stands alone in looking upon "the failure of Ophelia to respond to Hamlet's love in all its depth and ardor" as "the turning-point in the tragedy."

Goethe's evil interpretation of the character of Ophelia seems to me entirely uncalled for; and some other German critics have been eager to outdo their master. It may be that Goethe's explanations prove some impurity of mind—but not in Ophelia. For us, as for Laertes,—

"From her fair and unpolluted flesh"
The "violets spring."

But little space can be given here to what Furness calls "the one great insoluble mystery of Hamlet's sanity." The various opinions range all the way from the conviction of Hudson and others that the Prince is not sane, to the view of Furness "that he is neither mad nor pretends to be." Lowell speaks of Hamlet's "perpetual inclination to irony"; and Weiss would make this the explanation of most things that have seemed to many to indicate a feigning of insanity.

I accept the usual view that Hamlet is not mad and that he does feign madness; lack of sanity is not therefore for me an explanation of his delay. Hamlet's soul is indeed violently agitated by the words of the Ghost; but the pretence that his mind is diseased seems to me a device, taken up at first on the impulse of the moment, by means of which he both avoids decisive action, and makes it possible to give safe though veiled utterance to his tumultuous feelings.

A few students not only accept the mental derangement of the hero as a fact, but consider it to be so serious and deep-seated as to furnish the sole and the sufficient explanation for all the irregularities of his conduct. A recent article by Mr. Oakeshott seems to advocate this opinion.¹

Except for those who take the somewhat extreme position just indicated, the question whether Hamlet's madness is real or pretended is perhaps not of central importance in the interpretation of the drama. Grimm and Lewes have argued very forcibly that it is not possible to make up one's mind on this point, and that Shakespeare did not intend to have us do so. I believe that the debate on this topic concerns largely the use of terms, the definition of madness; and that it often indicates no fundamental difference of opinion between the opposing sides. Hamlet is sane enough to be the responsible hero of a great tragedy. He is not sane enough to be pronounced rational by the experts: few are.

Probably all who think that Hamlet makes a pretence of madness will agree that the interest which he takes in this feigning helps to keep him from positive action. An English writer, Boas, says in a recent book:—

“Hamlet becomes absorbed in the intellectual fascination of his rôle; he revels in the opportunities it gives him of bewildering those about him, of letting fly shafts of mockery, here, there, and everywhere. But these verbal triumphs are Pyrrhic victories, which draw him further and further from his legitimate task.”²

That Hamlet, shocked by the evil about him, desires to open the eyes of his generation to its corruptness and to act as a reformer, is thought by some to be implied in the couplet,—

“The time is out of joint: O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!” I, v, 188–9.

¹ “Hamlet. From a Student's Notebook.” *The Westminster Review*. Reprinted in the *Eclectic Magazine* for August, 1897.

² *Shakspeare and His Predecessors*, N. Y., 1896, p. 398.

Professor Brandl thinks that this desire has force in keeping the hero back from action.¹ The words seem to me to be a violent expression of Hamlet's antipathy toward the task which the Ghost has laid upon him.

The Queen says of Hamlet at the fencing-bout, "He's fat, and scant of breath" (V, II, 298). There are other expressions in the play which have been taken to indicate that the Prince is not sound of body. Loening thinks that the evidence points to an internal fatness, fatness of the heart; and he believes that this physical infirmity helps to explain the inactivity of the hero.

This word "fat" has been a stone of stumbling. Although there is no authority for any other word, "fat" has been looked upon either as a misprint for "hot" or "faint," or as referring to the physical appearance of Burbage, the first actor to play this rôle.

At least two interpreters, Börne and Rohrbach, have looked upon Hamlet as a plain coward, and have found in this fact alone the decisive reason for his inaction. While other scholars make this consideration less prominent, there are many who find in the Prince some measure of cowardice.

II. "TAINT NOT THY MIND."

If we look now at the second command of the Ghost,—

"But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind," I, v, 84-5.

what farther considerations offer themselves as possible explanations of Hamlet's delay? Certainly we must consider the following:—

1. A filial desire and purpose to obey this injunction, "Taint not thy mind."
2. Conscientious scruples against blood-revenge, and an instinctive shrinking from it as barbarous.

¹ *Shakspeare*, Berlin, 1894, pp. 151, 154.

3. An aversion to killing one who, though stained with crime, is the brother of Hamlet's father, the husband of his mother, and his King.

While these facts have been suggested as helping to explain Hamlet's delay, it is most natural to look upon them, especially the last two, as additional incitements to revenge.

4. A sensitive fear of the Prince that the attainment of the crown is his real object, or will seem to be.

5. A clear perception on the part of Hamlet that, if he shall kill the King, he will be unable to justify the act in the eyes of the Danish people.

6. A desire to expose, disgrace, and dethrone the King, and so punish him before the world, and a belief that this is what the Ghost really commands.

All will admit the force of the first motive mentioned, Hamlet's desire to obey this injunction of his father. The difficulty lies solely in interpreting the command.

The second ground just suggested as an explanation of Hamlet's conduct is that he has conscientious scruples against blood-revenge and an instinctive aversion to it. If we accept these motives as conceivable and consistent with the play, then Hamlet finds himself confronted with an intensely tragic dilemma. The long-accepted interpretation of his character put forth by Goethe and Coleridge, taken by itself, seems deficient in dramatic power. Professor Corson well asks: "Where is the dramatic interest to come from, with such an irredeemable do-nothing for the hero of the drama as Coleridge represents Hamlet to be?"¹

The opinion that Hamlet is held back from action by conscientious scruples was forcibly put by a writer in the *Quarterly Review* in 1847. Hamlet accuses himself either of

"Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
Of thinking too precisely on the event,"

IV, iv, 40-1.

¹ *Introduction to Shakespeare*, p. 218.

and he seems to reveal his secret questionings of heart when he asks Horatio, even after the King has tried to take his life,—

—“is't not perfect conscience,
To quit him with this arm?” V, II, 67-8.

Loening has shown, I think, that the context forbids us to look upon the line,—

“Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.”

III, I, 83.

as a proof that conscientious scruples keep Hamlet from acting. The line does imply, however, that the Prince is sensitive to moral considerations.

The opinion just outlined was set forth in the *Quarterly Review* as opposed to the explanation “that the thinking part of Hamlet predominates over the active”; but it is not necessary to look upon the two interpretations as antagonistic. Both together may be better than either alone.

A great objection to the view now before us is that it makes the Ghost assign to Hamlet what may fairly be called an impossible task; but is there not a contradiction at this point in the play too deeply fixed to be denied or overlooked? If Hamlet determines at the same time to secure revenge and to keep his mind untainted, has he not adopted contradictory principles of action, if we give to the words “revenge” and “taint not thy mind” their natural meaning? He who sets before him as his chosen task the accomplishment of blood-revenge must fling to the winds all other considerations; he who is determined, howsoever he pursues his course, not to taint his mind, cannot seek that “wild justice,” revenge. Whether or not Hamlet clearly perceives the fact, may not this inherent contradiction, this fixed dilemma, be an important cause for his delay? By this explanation, we have an irresistible force, the passionate desire for vengeance, encountering an immovable obstacle in

Hamlet's conscience, made more firm by the warning command, "Taint not thy mind." Is not this the tragic conflict?

In this view Hamlet is not "the natural man," neither is he the Christian minister of justice. He is "in a strait" betwixt the two, yielding now to one impulse, now to another. It is noticeable that both Christian and natural sentiments appear freely in this play, and almost side by side:—

"Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long,"

I, i, 158-160.

"Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder." I, v, 25.

I am very glad that Taine has said so bluntly that Hamlet's task is simply "to go quietly, and, with premeditation, plunge a sword into a breast." How many readers believe that all the ethical presuppositions of the play, its entire moral atmosphere, find adequate expression in this doctrine of assassination?

After a most elaborate argument on this point, Loening accepts as his own the following statement of Vischer:—

"That blood-revenge is an unquestioned and sacred duty is absolutely taken for granted in this tragedy; the man who opposes this opinion has no longer any claim to understand the play."

Loening admits, however, that the mediaeval church looked upon private revenge as sinful. The doctrine of Purgatory, too, came from the Church. What wonder that the Ghost, escaping from Purgatorial fires, speaks to Hamlet words of warning as well as words of incitement? The command "Taint not thy mind" is not in the First Quarto; why is it present in the later versions? What *do* these words mean, if Hamlet is free to put an end to the King's life in any way that he may choose?

There can be no doubt, I think, that Shakespeare practically takes for granted in his plays the moral standards of

his own age. Just as we are to explain from the peculiar legal status of certain English cities of Shakespeare's own day Shylock's words,—

“ . . . let the danger light
Upon your charter and your city's freedom.”

Mer. of Venice, IV, I, 38-9.

so we are to interpret our play, on the whole, by the moral standards of Shakespeare's England. Francis de Belleforest, a French gentleman, probably wrote his version of the story of Hamlet in 1570. This version is believed to be the source from which Shakespeare took the story. The earliest known copy of the English translation of Belleforest bears the date 1608. Elze tells us that the translation “adheres throughout to the original with slavish fidelity, except in two places” that do not concern us. Though Belleforest distinctly states that he is giving an account of an early time when the Danes were “barbarous and uncivil,” the following passage from the English version, one of several that could be cited, will show that the incompatibility between Christianity and the finest morality on the one hand, and the practice of blood-revenge on the other, was clearly felt in Shakespeare's day, and could well be suggested to him by the very work from which he is supposed to have taken this particular story:—

“ . . . he that will follow this course must speak and do all things whatsoever that are pleasing and acceptable to him whom he meaneth to deceive . . . ; for that is rightly to play and counterfeit the fool, when a man is constrained to dissemble and kiss his hand whom in heart he could wish a hundred feet depth under the earth, so he might never see him more, if it were not a thing wholly to be disliked in a Christian, who by no means ought to have a bitter gall or desires infected with revenge.”¹

The beginning of Bacon's essay on Revenge also helps to disprove the opinion that in Shakespeare's time blood-revenge

¹ Furness, II, p. 95.

cannot possibly have been looked upon as an unworthy thing. The essay opens with these words: "Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out."

Moreover, the Prince can in no way bring the King to any sort of judicial duel, or judgment of God, but must kill him treacherously, must stab him in the back, if not literally at least practically. This fact would make actual blood-revenge very distasteful to one possessing real fineness of feeling. What wonder if the warning cry rings in Hamlet's ears, "Howsoever thou pursuest this act, taint not thy mind!"

The view that Hamlet is held back from acting by "the secret voice of conscience, and the shrinking of a delicate soul from an assassination in cold blood" is supported by Richardson¹ and Ulrici, by passages in the earlier writings of Hudson, and by the French critics Mézières and Courdaveaux. The last writer says: "Seek, outside of this explanation, one that explains everything, and you will seek in vain."

Some commentators believe that Hamlet's fear that the crown shall seem to be his object is an important reason for his delay; but, though plausible in itself, the position hardly seems to be supported by the language of the play; certainly we cannot give to the cause suggested a prominent place.

The most important theory of this drama that has been put forward in recent years explains Hamlet's conduct entirely from the nature of his task. According to this view, his mission is to depose and disgrace the King, and thus set matters right before the world, not merely to put an end to his life. The adulterer, murderer, and usurper must taste the full bitterness of a felon's death. This theory, suggested by Ziegler in 1803, put with great force by Klein in 1846, and accepted by L. Schipper in 1862, was given full and

¹ The first edition of Richardson's *Essays* appeared in 1775. Furness cites the edition of 1797.

adequate expression by Karl Werder in 1875. Hudson and Professor Corson accept this general position.

I will let Werder present his own case. He says:—

“I deny, first of all, . . . that it is possible for Hamlet *to dare* to do what the critics . . . almost unanimously require of him. . . . The situation of things, the force of circumstances, the nature of his task, directly forbid it. . . . *We* are in the secret, *we* sit, as the public, in the council of the gods. But the Danes do not know that Claudius is the murderer of his brother, and are never to be convinced of it if Hamlet slays the King, and then appeals for his vindication to a private communication which a ghost has made to him. . . .

“But what now has Hamlet in truth to do? What is his real task? A very sharply defined duty. . . . Not to crush the King at once, . . . but to bring him to confession, to unmask, and convict him: this is his first, nearest, inevitable duty. As things stand, truth and justice can be known only from one mouth, the mouth of the crowned criminal, . . . or they remain hidden and buried till the last day. This is the point! Herein lie the terrors of this tragedy,—its enigmatical horror, its inexorable misery! The encoffined secrecy of the *unprovable* crime: this is the subterranean spring, whence flows its power to awaken fear and sympathy. . . .

“Killing the King *before* the proof is adduced would be, not killing the guilty, but killing the *proof*; it would be, not the murder of the criminal, but the murder of Justice! . . .

“Upon the one side, a well-defended fortress, and without, a single man, who is to take it, he alone. So stands Hamlet confronting his task!”

One advantage of Werder's view is that what most students regard as Hamlet's pretence of madness is at once adequately motivated. This device enables him “to give some vent to what is raging within him” without awakening suspicion; and possibly, “should any favorable opportunity offer itself,” “more active operations against the enemy than would be permitted to a sane man” may be tolerated in one supposed to be mad.

This view also exalts and ennobles our conception of Hamlet's character. All the familiar charges against him fall to the ground. The Prince whom we all love and pity now claims also our unqualified admiration. As good and wise as he is ill-fated, he stands forth almost without "spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing." The drama becomes almost entirely a tragedy of Fate, not a tragedy of Character.

All must grant, too, that the situation and the progress of the action, as Werder outlines them, are intensely tragic. So deeply do I feel this that I have often wished that Shakespeare might have written this *Hamlet* also. Says Hudson, in presenting this conception of the play:—

"The very plan of the drama, as I understand it, is to crush all the intellectual fragrance out of Hamlet, between a necessity and an impossibility of acting. The tremendous problem, the terrible dilemma which he has to grapple with, is one that Providence alone can solve, as Providence does solve it at the last."¹

But I must renounce Werder and all his works. I cannot think that the natural impression which the drama as we have it makes upon an unprejudiced reader is consistent with this new explanation.

Werder does not give the natural interpretation to the first commission of the Ghost, the demand for revenge. He makes up for this, so to speak, by forcing the meaning of the second command also. To revenge does not naturally mean "to bring to confession, to unmask, and convict"; and the words "Taint not thy mind" are most naturally interpreted as an incitement to Hamlet to obey scrupulously the promptings of his conscience, not as a warning to guard his reputation.

In spite of an amount of soliloquy which is unexampled in dramatic literature, this theory is obliged to assume that Hamlet fails to express the one purpose which fills his mind. After explaining what seems to him to be the real situation

¹ School edition of *Hamlet*, p. 21.

when Hamlet discovers the King at prayer, Werder says: "Hamlet, it is true, does not himself say this,—no! But the state of the case says it instead." This form of speech is significant of Werder's entire method. He is constantly explaining to us his own view of "the state of the case"; he makes little effort to prove that Hamlet holds the same view. The Prince is mistaken, then, when he taunts himself with "unpacking his heart." This he cannot do; at every point "the state of the case" must be called in to speak for him. It must be admitted, though, that the words of the hero when he comes upon the praying King, are looked upon by very few persons as a wholly truthful expression of his mind.

What Hamlet actually says in his soliloquies, also, is decidedly at variance with what "the state of the case" is supposed to be saying for him. Werder's interpretation of the first part of the soliloquy beginning "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (II, II, 576) is, that the hero relieves his agony by "falling out with himself" and uttering unjust reproaches. Concerning Hamlet's sharp arraignment of himself after he learns the destination of the troops of Fortinbras, Professor Corson says with admirable frankness: "It must not be explained on the theory of Hamlet's indisposition to action, much as it may appear to support that theory."

Dramatic soliloquy is largely a conventional device for informing the audience concerning the state of mind of the speaker. In most places where Shakespeare represents his characters as thus thinking aloud they certainly would not naturally do so in real life. If we can explain away a mass of such utterances, and suppose that the solitary speaker is systematically untrue to his real thought, then the interpretation of dramatic soliloquy becomes not merely a fine art, but one so superfine as to be altogether beyond the reach of merely human powers.

The play before the King may, apparently, achieve two results if entirely successful: it may convince Hamlet of the

Ghost's integrity and of the truth of his story; and it may surprise the King into some kind of public confession (II, II, 617-21, 627-8; III, II, 85-7). Those inclined to the Werder view naturally consider that the central purpose of this device is to obtain some sort of confession from the King. This result is not secured, yet Hamlet seems to regard his experiment as highly successful. He has been more concerned in satisfying his own doubts than in inducing the King to confess.

I cannot believe, however, that the Prince has set either of these purposes before him in any genuine, earnest way. Both are pretences. He has never really questioned the honesty of the Ghost, and he has little hope of any open confession from the King. The play is hardly more than a plausible excuse for doing nothing.

Also, if we accept the view of Werder, the Ghost does not seem to have a particle of justification for saying to Hamlet, when he is with his mother,—

“this visitation
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.”

III, IV, 110-1.

Loening insists with reason that Shakespeare would not have allowed the King to meet death until after he had been branded before the world, if this were looked upon as the punishment which justice demanded, and if this had been enjoined by supernatural visitations.

There is a strong presumption against a theory which asks us to believe that Goethe and Coleridge misunderstood this play completely, and that they have been followed in their error by the great mass of the students of Shakespeare. Everything which they said about *Hamlet* is to be considered false, and pretty much everything which they did not say is to be accepted as true. Of course, a disputed question cannot be settled by an appeal to authority; but there is a weighty presumption against the new view. Werder himself unwittingly recognizes that a heavy burden of proof rests upon him

when he says: "That this point for a century long should never have been seen, is the most incomprehensible thing that has ever happened in aesthetic criticism from the very beginning of its existence." We have seen, however, that there were Werderites before Werder.

Baumgart says with great cogency:—

"Where does the Ghost or Hamlet speak of punishment merely, and of the necessity of a previous unmasking? It is revenge alone that the Ghost calls for, and swift revenge that Hamlet promises. . . . That the conviction wrought by the play is to lead to any measure looking to the public arraignment of the King, there is not a word to intimate. There is nothing in the whole piece which hints at any plan of Hamlet's, or at any intention to form one."

The popularity of Werder's theory seems to me to be parallel to that of certain Confessions and Creeds. These have often been widely accepted because more logical and self-consistent than the very Scriptures which suggested them, and which they sought to explain.

III. "NOR CONTRIVE AGAINST THY MOTHER AUGHT."

The third command of the Ghost must now be considered:—

"nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her." I, v, 85-8.

If we try to make this command prominent in explaining Hamlet's course, the following grounds for his inaction suggest themselves:—

1. A desire and purpose to obey this injunction of his father.

2. Affection for his mother, and a desire to save her from the shame of exposure.

So far as I know, Tschischwitz, the man of many consonants, is the only critic who has given a central place to these

motives as really determining Hamlet's conduct. I quote his comment upon the following passage :—

“O, most wicked speed, to post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets !
It is not nor it cannot come to good :
But break, my heart; for I must hold my tongue.”

I, II, 156-9.

“Observe well that Hamlet is forced by his piety to maintain this silence in presence of the courtiers *under all circumstances*, even after the appearance of the Ghost. It is not until his heart really breaks that he breaks this silence also, and gives Horatio permission to proclaim what has happened.”

Some other commentators look upon this line of argument as having some force. Weiss has said :—

“The question of revenge becomes more difficult to settle, especially as it involves widowing his mother; and it is noticeable that the father himself, who afterwards deplored Hamlet's irresolution, had previously made suggestions to him [rather, imposed a command upon him] which hampered his action by constraining him to feel how complicated the situation was.”

In point of fact, however, to prove the King guilty of the murder of his brother would not necessarily involve the exposure of the Queen. The Prince is simply forbidden to take vengeance upon his mother. Indeed, in the First Quarto, where the situation is the same as in the later form of the play, Hamlet implores the Queen :—

“Mother, but assist me in revenge,
And in his death your infamy shall die.”

The Queen replies :—

“Hamlet, I vow by that majesty
That knows our thoughts and looks into our hearts,
I will conceal, consent, and do my best,
What stratagem soe'er thou shalt devise.”

IV. THE TRACES IN "HAMLET" OF AN OLDER PLAY.

In attempting to interpret *Hamlet* by any explanation or combination of explanations derived from a study of the drama itself, some difficulties and discrepancies remain to trouble the student. In the present division of this paper and in the following one, we shall take up certain considerations that are not drawn from the play itself.

The noble words of King Thoas in Goethe's *Iphigenie* almost make us forget that he sacrifices captive strangers upon the altar. Goethe accepted the old story, but he has refined the character of Thoas; hence, while it is assumed that the King acts barbarously, he speaks nobly.

May there not be some clashing of this sort in our *Hamlet*, since the play is based upon a crude old tale of blood and revenge? Shakespeare was also embarrassed by the fact that the theater-going public had already a definite conception of the story of the Prince and of his character.

As already indicated, an account of the life of Hamlet appeared in a French prose work by one Belleforest, *Histoires Tragiques*, and was written in 1570. The Elizabethan *Hamlet* is believed to be based upon this form of the story. The tale is known to go back as far as the *Historiae Daniacae* of Saxo Grammaticus, who wrote about 1200. Because Hamlet's phrase to Polonius, "old men . . . have a plentiful lack of wit" (II, II, 199, 202), seems to Loening to have been suggested by an expression in Saxo, this critic concludes that Shakespeare was acquainted with that version also. In Belleforest, Hamlet kills his uncle, and then goes to England, whence he returns "with two wives."

Beginning with 1589 we find numerous allusions to an English play upon the story of Hamlet. This work has been lost. It seems to have been a crude tragedy of blood and vengeance. Unlike the story in Belleforest, but like that in Shakespeare, this tragedy had a ghost. The cry of the Ghost in this lost play, "Hamlet, revenge!" is often quoted

by writers of the time. A few students have conjectured that this drama was a youthful production of Shakespeare; a German scholar, Sarrazin, is confident that Thomas Kyd was its author.¹ The importance for us of this vanished play consists in the proof which it furnishes that a distinct conception of the character of Hamlet and of the story of his life had possession of the stage before Shakespeare took up the subject. Dr. Latham goes so far as to say that "long before it came under the cognizance of Shakespeare" the character of Hamlet was "as strongly stamped and stereotyped" as were those of Medea, Orestes, and Achilles upon the Greek stage. As a practical application of this doctrine he argues that "the pretendedness" of Hamlet's madness is as unquestionable "as the reality of that of Orestes."

In 1603 was published the first version of our *Hamlet*, the so-called First Quarto. This is somewhat more than half as long as the later play. The outline of the action is substantially the same as that which we know; but the Queen, as already indicated, repents of her sin, and offers to assist Hamlet in securing revenge. Strangely enough, the First Quarto has been considered by some competent critics to be better fitted for stage-presentation than the later versions.

The text is the same for the most part in the Second Quarto of 1604 and in the First Folio of 1623; these give the play in the form with which we are all familiar.² As compared with the First Quarto, these versions make only slight changes in the story; but the astonishing fulness of thought and poetry which distinguishes this play appears for the first time in the Second Quarto.

That the gradual development of this drama into its present form might easily give rise to contradictions in the final text will be clear if we look for a moment, just by way of illustration, at the question of Hamlet's age.

¹ *Thomas Kyd und sein Kreis*, Berlin, 1892.

² Viëtor's parallel edition of the three texts of the play is heartily commended (Marburg, 1891).

There is nothing in the First Quarto which requires us to believe that "young Hamlet" is over nineteen or twenty years of age. The skull of Yorick, who played with him when he was a child, has been in the ground only "this dozen year." In the later text we learn that Hamlet's age is thirty (V, 1, 153-177); and that Yorick's skull has "lain in the earth three and twenty years." In spite of this, however, many things remain in the accepted text which seem to make Hamlet a youth of not more than twenty: among these are his wish to return as a student to Wittenberg, the election of Claudius as king without the bestowal of any consideration upon the claim of Hamlet, the probable age of his mother when she yields to guilty passion, and especially the language of Laertes when he speaks to Ophelia concerning the Prince. Mr. Wilson Barrett, the actor, thinks that the age was given as thirty for the convenience of some actor who was "incapable of looking the youthful prince."¹ Many scholars, however, accept on this point the opinion expressed by Dr. Furnivall:²—

"I look on it as certain, that when Shakespeare began the play [and while he was composing the version preserved for us in the First Quarto], he conceivd Hamlet as quite a young man [following the accepted story and the tradition of the stage]. But as the play grew, as greater weight of reflection, of insight into character, of knowledge of life, &c., were wanted, Shakespeare necessarily and naturally made Hamlet a formd man; and, by the time that he got to the Grave-diggers' scene [in writing the version of the Second Quarto], told us the Prince was 30,—the right age for him then. . . . The two parts of the play *are* inconsistent on this main point in Hamlet's state."³

Perhaps it ought to be said here that several other minor discrepancies have been noted in the play. It is impossible,

¹*Lippincott's Magazine*, vol. 45.

²The writer of this article is responsible for the passages in brackets: these bring out more explicitly what I suppose to be the thought of Dr. Furnivall.

³Furness, *Hamlet*, 1, p. 391.

for example, that Horatio has been at Elsinore some two months before he meets Hamlet (I, II, 138, 161-176). Again, it is four months after the death of Hamlet's father when the mad Ophelia sports with wild flowers. Did the dead king take a nap in a Danish orchard in mid-winter? and was it his "custom always of the afternoon"? The fact that Hamlet knows at the close of Act III that he is to be sent to England (III, IV, 200) is very puzzling. The King has only just decided upon that course (III, III, 4), and there seems to have been no opportunity for the hero to get this information. Two months after Laertes left home Hamlet says,—“I have of late . . . forgone all custom of exercises” (II, II, 306-8); about ten days or two weeks later, according to Daniel's estimate of the time, the Prince declares to Horatio, while speaking of the proposed fencing-bout,—“Since he [Laertes] went into France, I have been in continual practice” (V, II, 220-1).

The explanation of Dr. Furnivall concerning the age of the hero suggests that some more central difficulties in the play may perhaps be explained in a similar way. Are there in the drama as a whole unconformable strata? Sarrazin and others, among the Germans, Kenny in England, and Professor March and Mr. John Corbin in this country have made use of this method of explanation. Perhaps the last-named writer is the one who goes farthest. He says:—

“Shakspeare's happiest additions to the old tragedy of blood were precisely contradictory to its vital structure as a drama. Wherever Hamlet is in action his character dates back to the lost play: the Shakspearean element has to do almost exclusively with the reflective, imaginative, humane traits of his portraiture.” “When Hamlet is in action he is to be judged by the standards of the tragedy of blood and revenge. It is only in his speech and manner that the Shakspearean conception shines forth. In this fact lies the root of most of the disagreements among the modern critics and actors.”¹

¹ *The Elizabethan Hamlet*. Scribners, 1895, pp. 49, 84.

The fact that the old tragedy delighted its audiences with these horrors may well be the main reason why the six principal characters, together with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, are killed during the play,—five of them, if we include Polonius, meeting death before our eyes. The easy fashion in which the Prince consigns to destruction his former school fellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, may come from the old play. Perhaps the difficulty in finding a motive for Hamlet's action in pretending madness admits in part a similar explanation. In the story as given by Belleforest he feigns madness because "perceiving himself to be in danger of his life." Victor Hugo interprets our play in the same way, but where in the text does it appear that this is the motive? May it not be that the feigning of insanity is a feature which Shakespeare accepts from the traditional story and from the older play, but of which he makes little constructive use?

Now for the bearing of all this upon our main topic, the reasons for Hamlet's dilatoriness. The above discussion naturally suggests that Shakespeare, while retaining the crude story of revenge that was fixed in the public mind, gradually deepened and refined the character of Hamlet until it clashed with that story. Conscientious scruples against blood-revenge, I admit, are utterly foreign to the original tale. In spite of changes and additions, it may well be that the dramatist was so hampered by the fixed outlines of the accepted story that he was prevented from motivating the inactivity of the Prince so fully as he could otherwise have done. The energetic Hamlet retained from the old play accords but badly with the reflective, halting hero of a more intellectual age: the new wine bursts the old bottles.

The loss of the pre-Shakespearean *Hamlet* makes it impossible to say just how much weight should be given to this line of argument. Because our play departs very freely and very far from the story as given in Belleforest, Loening does

not believe that Shakespeare was really hampered by the old tale and the already existing play.

V. HAMLET AS THE MOUTH-PIECE OF SHAKESPEARE.

All lovers of Shakespeare must admit the force of these words from Kreyssig, a German critic: "From the rich troop of his heroes, Shakespeare has chosen Hamlet as the exponent, to the spectators and to posterity, of all that lay nearest to his own heart." The American poet-critic, Jones Very, speaks of "the tendency of Shakespeare to overact this particular part of Hamlet, and thus give it an obscurity from too close a connection with his own mind."¹

Though Rümelin goes too far in this particular direction, the following words concerning Shakespeare's tendency to make Hamlet his own mouth-piece seem to me to have much force:—

"We must not fail to see that this use of the legend enters into the dramatic subject and into the course of the action as a somewhat foreign and disturbing element; we must perceive that the legend, whose essential features the play still keeps, is in itself little fitted for the interpolation of an element so subjective and so modern."

Let us look at some specific passages in the play that are evidently the personal utterances of Shakespeare. The reference to the child-actors, added in the First Folio, is clearly a "local hit"; it comes from the dramatist, not from Hamlet and Rosencrantz (II, II, 353–379). The character of Osric is undoubtedly a satire on certain affectations of Shakespeare's own day. That Shakespeare himself is speaking when Hamlet instructs the players in the art of acting seems certain. Though Loening defends it ingeniously, the passage has no vital connection with the plot. The real reason why we have the lines is that Shakespeare had some things to say

¹*Poems and Essays*, p. 62.

concerning the proper carriage, gesture, and elocution of an actor; and no man will ever know how much strutting and bellowing the world has escaped because of this simple textbook of histrionics, known and read of all men.

The Sonnets of Shakespeare, in which he "unlocked his heart," echo with striking distinctness some of the complaints of the melancholy Prince of Denmark. The connection is especially marked between the sixty-sixth Sonnet and some portions of the soliloquy beginning "To be or not to be."

In any performance of *Hamlet*, that pearl, the Grave-Diggers' scene is sure to be presented (V, 1, 1-240); but it has no dramatic justification,—that is, the action is in no way advanced. These are the deep musings of Shakespeare's own mind and heart, and we do not estimate them according to their purely dramatic value.

Our love for this play springs largely from the fact that Shakespeare, disregarding strictly dramatic considerations, has given freely to Hamlet the charm, the warmth, and the boundlessness of his own nature.

The bearing of this discussion upon our central inquiry may be stated as follows: our impression of Hamlet's dilatoriness is intensified by his long soliloquies and by his abundant comments upon the various problems of life; but these utterances are in part the personal outpourings of Shakespeare himself, not called for by either the plot of the piece or the characterization: "the hands are the hands of Esau," but the voice is the voice of Jacob.

CONCLUSION.

The Teutonic mind naturally looks upon the portrayal of character as the real purpose of the drama, and as "its own excuse." It is safe to say that Shakespeare has given in *Hamlet* absolutely the ultimate example of character-portrayal in drama. The completeness with which the nature and disposition of the Prince, his entire mental and moral being, are

put before us, is something which we are accustomed to find only in the wide-ranging, loosely constructed novel, not in the intense, concentrated, and sharply limited drama.

Dramatic criticism is inclined to insist that only those characteristics of the hero should be made prominent which really influence the course of the action; and that these characteristics should be unmistakable. According to this standard *Hamlet* is certainly faulty. That the play is marked by an excess of monologue seems to be recognized by the omission from the First Folio of some of the utterances of the hero, including the sermon on drunkenness (I, iv, 17-38), and even the powerful soliloquy upon seeing the army of Fortinbras (IV, iv, 32-66; ll. 9-31 are also omitted). Certain features in the management of the action have also been pronounced by Goethe and others to be "extremely faulty." But it is not especially because of its defects that the world is not likely to see another *Hamlet*: its marvellous excellences are a more conclusive reason. None but himself can bend the bow of Odysseus.

Before the reader decides which one of the possible reasons for Hamlet's inactivity he will adopt in making up his own theory of the play, let me ask him, "Can you not accept a good number of them?" In many cases, I think, they are not exclusive and contradictory, but should be looked upon as complementary and harmonious. The large number of these reasons of itself makes it clear why there are so many opinions concerning the character of the hero. One critic accents one motive; another, another. Superficially their views may seem to themselves and others to be irreconcilable, while at bottom they may be largely at one.

Not only is it hardly possible for two critics to agree upon the same interpretation of the play; one cannot altogether agree with himself for two successive readings. The considerations involved are so numerous that one is hardly able to give due weight to all of them; it is inevitable that one should be somewhat at the mercy of his mood.

At my present stage of development, my own theory as to the reasons for Hamlet's dilatoriness is somewhat as follows :—I accept the first three grounds for Hamlet's delay indicated under the first general division of this paper, namely : an excessive tendency to reflection, weakness of will, and especially a melancholy temperament and extreme sensitiveness. I find myself varying in the degree of emphasis which I give to these different factors, but I am not inclined to look upon the hero's excessive tendency to reflection as something really primary and causative. Under the second general division of the paper, I accent Hamlet's conscientious scruples against blood-revenge, and his natural aversion to killing the King. It seems to me entirely reasonable that all these qualities should be associated in one person. I believe further that Shakespeare was hampered in some measure by the fixed outlines of the accepted version of the old story ; also that the fact that he expresses freely through the mouth of the Prince his own thoughts and feelings intensifies the impression of weakness and dilatoriness which Hamlet makes upon us. I give less prominence to the other considerations that have been mentioned, though I look upon some of them as having a measure of force. I oppose the purely objective explanation of Hamlet's delay advocated by Werder and some others.

The problem of Hamlet ! Who shall altogether solve it ? Even while we cherish the vain hope of doing this, some passage from the play comes to mind which accords but poorly with our elaborate solution. And then a princely form and careworn face rise up before us, and the pale lips say haughtily : " Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me ! You would play upon me : you would seem to know my stops : you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass : you would pluck out the heart of my mystery ! "

ALBERT H. TOLMAN.